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ABSTRACT

This digest examines changes that are involved in an elementary school library media program when the school's instructional methods move from a basic skills to a whole language approach. These changes are discussed in terms of three curricular foci--theme studies, process writing, and literature-based reading--and new demands that are placed on the collection and the school librarian. Because the whole language approach relies heavily on children's literature instead of textbooks, large numbers of trade books are required, and librarians must work cooperatively with teachers to ensure that the necessary resources are available in the media center when needed. Flexible scheduling in the school media center is important to the success of theme studies as it allows children to seek answers to questions as they arise. Since whole language creates an enormous demand for books, videos, cassettes, and computer programs, library media specialists can expect dramatic changes in collection use as well as changes in their role. Not only must library media specialists become very familiar with the library collection, but they must also serve as a resource to students and teachers during the planning and execution of theme studies, a teacher of information skills, and an instruction leader. (10 references) (MAB)

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Whole Language in an Elementary School Library Media Center

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Introduction: Philosophical Orientation

In a traditional or basic skills approach to education, learning is broken down into small pieces. Children are asked to learn these pieces and are rewarded for their behavior. Teachers diagnose what children know and then remediate by teaching them what they do not know. Social constructivism, reflected in the whole language approach, is very close to the opposite in its philosophical stance. Learning occurs through use of language and literature, not as a separate part of it. Texts are kept whole, not broken down into parts. Teachers observe and assess what children know and build upon their knowledge, designing a classroom environment and learning activities cooperatively with children so that they become internally motivated to learn. The goals of instruction are broader and address affective considerations. Whereas in a basic skills program the goal is to teach children how to read and write, the goal of a whole language curriculum is to help children become avid readers and writers, to develop a love of learning.

The change from a basic skills to a whole language approach precipitates vast changes in the school library media center. This digest will examine these changes, specifically at the elementary school level, in terms of three curricular foci: theme studies, process writing, and literature-based reading. It will also discuss the new demands placed upon the collection and the school librarian.

Theme Studies

Theme studies are not unlike the units of study many teachers have taught for years. The main difference is that theme studies rely upon children's literature instead of textbooks. Children explore a topic in far more detail and spend much longer on each theme than in a textbook-driven program. Children engaged in a theme study use the school media center to seek information about specific topics. They also use works of various genres to supplement their research. Fiction, for example, demonstrates attitudes and behaviors, the reasons to use the information found in nonfiction books. Poetry can provide an aesthetic dimension to the theme study topic.

Thematic studies require large numbers of trade books, which the children use with the teachers to build the content of their instructional program. Librarians must work cooperatively with teachers to assure that resources are available in the media center when needed. At certain times of the year, pulling books can be a full-time job for the media specialist.

Flexible scheduling in the school media center is also important to the success of theme studies. When the media center is available to individuals and small groups of children virtually all day, children are free to seek information when questions arise.

Process Writing

The process writing program provides another opportunity for children to turn to books (Calkins & Harwayne, 1990). When they encounter problems in their own writing, children look to published authors for solutions. For example, children might examine "real" books to see how authors introduce different characters without listing them.

The concepts of authorship and illustration are vital to an interactive view of reading and writing (Lamme, 1989a, 1989b; Lamme & Ledbetter, 1990). Indeed, as children become authors themselves, they become interested in other authors as people and writers. When a class becomes "hooked," the media center must be prepared with a good supply of books by the favorite author or illustrator. Children also want information about authors and illustrators, and the media center will need a large collection of file materials to satisfy this interest.

Literature-based Reading

Literature-based reading programs focus upon helping children become avid and reflective readers, rather than merely skilled readers (McConaghy, 1990; Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Short & Pierce, 1990). Instead of being tested after reading, children share opinions about books, both orally and in writing. This change of focus draws readers to genre studies and studies of literary elements, again making demands upon the librarian and the collection. For example, children who notice a pattern in a book, such as the shift from reality to fantasy to reality in *High Rise Glorious Skittle Skat Roarious Sky Pie Angel Food Cake* (Willard, 1990) are likely to request more books with that pattern. Librarians can help teachers use children's comments to lead them to other good books, encouraging children to read and to respond at higher levels to what they are reading.

Other activities in a literature-based reading program that call for librarian involvement include:

- Reading Workshops, where children select books based on personal interest, link their reading to prior experience, and keep reading logs or literature journals to record their reactions;

- Book Buddies, where experienced readers have the opportunity to read aloud and fledgling readers experience a lap reading situation; and
- Sustained Silent Reading, where children use some time every day to read books for pleasure with no interruptions and no testing at the end of the reading. Children learn how to select books they enjoy and to sustain their reading.

Changes in Collection Use

The programs described above create an enormous demand for books. It is not uncommon in a whole language school for teachers to check out over 100 books at a time! In addition, in many whole language schools each child leaves school every day with a book to read with his or her family. Many librarians also provide a box of books from the media center for each classroom to support buddy reading, sustained silent reading, and home reading programs. Librarians can also expect changes in circulation patterns when a school moves to whole language. To determine areas of relative over-use and under-use, librarians may want to study data from automated circulation systems.

In today's technological age, classroom teachers do not rely solely upon books for their instructional programs. Videos, cassettes, and computer programs are in high demand as well. There has been a great increase in the publication of non-print media linked to children's books. As children become more avid readers, they become increasingly interested in these media links to their reading.

Changes in the Role of the Librarian

As noted throughout this digest, the librarian in a whole language school plays an important role in promoting reading and an appreciation of literature. He or she must know the book collection intimately. In addition, the librarian serves as: (1) a resource to students and teachers during the planning and execution of theme studies; (2) a teacher of information skills; and (3) an instructional leader. Ideally, the librarian does more consulting and less teaching than he or she would in a traditional program (Dales, 1990).

Cullinan (1989) reports that many schools have been slow to recognize the potential of the librarian in a whole language program. It is best to involve the librarian in the transition to whole language right from the start. Recent guidelines from the American Association of School Librarians (1988) promote "service at the point of need" and other key components to serving the needs of whole language teachers and students.

Often a debate arises over ownership and control of the books purchased to support whole language programs. Should new books be in classrooms where children have immediate access to them for their reading, writing and theme studies programs, or should they be in the media center and borrowed on a temporary basis by classroom teachers? A similar territorial issue arises in the ordering of new books. Should classroom teachers be able to order books they want for their instructional program, or should all orders go through the school librarian? In many schools the monies are divided so that classroom teachers do some ordering, while the librarian, relying heavily upon teacher recommendations, orders the bulk of the books for the media center.

Since the librarian is usually the most knowledgeable person about children's literature in a school, he or she typically takes on the task of keeping teachers up-to-date in the area of children's literature (Lamme & Ledbetter, 1990). Teachers who have relied primarily upon textbooks for a number of years need models for selecting books, reading aloud, giving book talks, conducting book discussions, storytelling, and involving children with puppetry, flannelboards, and story enactment. Not only do librarians share their expertise in all of these areas, but they also learn from teachers and read books that in previous times would have been the exclusive domain of classroom teachers.

Conclusion

The library resources needed to run a whole language program are different and more extensive than those needed to supplement a traditional program (Lamme & Ledbetter, 1990). Because the media center is the heart of the whole language program, it needs far more funding than it did when it only served a supplementary role to classroom instruction. These changes, though sometimes stressful, are embraced by most media specialists.

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This digest was prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources by Linda Leonard Lamme, Professor at the University of Florida College of Education, Gainesville, and Cecilia Beckett, Media Specialist at the Blackburn Elementary School, Manatee County, Florida. April 1992.

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